

## **JAPANESE PAINTING**

### **Overview**

Painting is an ancient tradition in Japan and has often enjoyed primacy of place among the visual arts. Although Japanese painting was heavily influenced by Buddhism—as was also true of China, Korea, Vietnam and India, among others, it had developed a distinct sensibility in the visual arts as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, Japanese love of nature, simplicity, the ephemeral—and in particular, the spiritual bond many Japanese feel with Mt. Fuji—is reflected in the works of many artists. Japan’s centuries-long embrace of military culture was also among the most important factors shaping Japanese painting. More than just the dominance of the actual military beginning in 1185, it was the creation of a culture and of institutions that promoted and facilitated the expansion and maintenance of the military system that had such an impact on Japanese painting. The eminent Japanese historian, Tom Conlon, calls this the creation of the “State of War,” which when applied to society, could very easily be called a “Culture of War.”

### **The Ancient and Classical Periods**

There is very little painting that still exists in Japan from the ancient era. That which does exist is extremely fragmentary and has been discovered during archaeological digs of Yayoi (300 BCE-300CE) and Kofun period (300-538 CE) tombs. Funerary objects within these tombs are known to have been colored with basic patterns with some identifiable shapes. However, that does not mean that Yayoi and Kofun period Japanese very seldom painted. Instead, the paucity of surviving examples indicates that, while some painting existed, the extent, type and style of painting is not well known.

One of the first paintings known in Japan with a discernable motif was discovered in the Takehara tomb on the southern island of Kyūshū. This tomb dates to the 6<sup>th</sup> century and is believed to have been associated with someone of high status. The wall painting depicts two warriors dressed in what appears to be rudimentary armor, with horses, a ship, two standards, and waves as well. At least two different colors are evident. The meaning of the painting is unclear and the image is either intentionally abstract or rendered by an unpracticed hand. Because there are so few examples of paintings from this age, it is not known whether or not the style was uncommon.



## The Post-classical Period

### The Influence of Buddhism

Japanese civilization was dramatically transformed by the cross-pollination of culture from China in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. As the new imperial government was taking shape in and around the area of Japan near the current city of Nara, Japan was introduced to Chinese ideas on statehood, law, language, landholding, architecture, philosophy and taxation, among other things. One central element of this new flowering of culture was the embrace of a new religion which could be used as a unifying spiritual force for the disparate and warring tribes of Japan. It is believed that Prince Shōtoku (574-622 CE), who wielded power as regent from 594-622, introduced Buddhism from China and provided material support and imperial sanction for the religion. Buddhism as a religion had already been in existence for approximately a millennium in South, Southeast and other parts of East Asia by this time and had a long-established tradition of iconography. The influence of Buddhism in Japanese paintings was profound and clearly reflected the new Buddhist sensibility.

The earliest surviving Buddhist paintings in Japan can be found on the Tamamushi shrine dating from the late 6<sup>th</sup> or early 7<sup>th</sup> century. This shrine is found in the Hōryūji temple, which, not coincidentally, is believed to have been founded by Prince Shōtoku. Painted on the wooden doors are multiple images of Buddhist sutras, conveying both narrative and morality tales. The paintings show

the efforts of a practiced and expert hand. The images, though not drawn to scale in the contemporary sense, show some sense of depth and perspective. The artist used multiple colors, some bright, others muted. Colors included traditional vermillion, green and black. However, the full spectrum of its color scheme is not known because potentially invasive pigment tests have not been allowed. The painting below shows two monks seated before an incense burner. Included in the image are two lions, two Bodhisattvas, and foliage. This is one of seven different images found on the shrine. Scholars disagree on its provenance and the artist or artists who created the work. Some argue that it was drawn by a foreigner living in Japan since it was painted on Japanese wood. Others insist, given that it was created using an early form of lacquer technique, that it was painted by someone native to Japan. Though lacquer painting originated in China, the style found on the Tamamushi shrine is not often seen on the mainland.



Another image from Hōryūji temple is a wall mural of a seated Amida Buddha. This image has been dated to the late 7<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike the image above, this style of painting is commonly found in Buddhist temples all over Asia. There is little doubt that this mural was either painted by a foreigner living in Japan or by a Japanese artist using a style widely employed in India. Though important as an early example, it is not as clearly a reflection of the Japanese artistic sensibility as found in the image above. The contrast between the two images found in Hōryūji temple demonstrates the emergence of a discrete Japanese artistic sensibility.



Many paintings, wall murals and other artistic decorations from the Nara Period (710-794) have survived. Scenes from Buddhist sutras, Bodhisattva and Amida Buddha are commonly found. Indeed, one might say that Buddhist iconography dominates the artistic landscape. Its influence on the development of Japanese painting is undeniable and continued for more than a millennium.

### ***Yamato-e***

As Japan moved from the Nara Period into the Heian Period (794-1185), Japanese culture became more clearly defined, mature and highly refined. Paintings on topics other than Buddhism began to appear and new styles emerged that, though still reflective of knowledge of artistic sensibilities on the mainland, began to show a more Japanese flare. Perhaps the most distinctive form was the *Yamato-e* style. *Yamato* is the ancient name for Japan and this style of painting is therefore understood to be “Japanese painting.” It is easy to infer from the name that other styles of painting existed with themes and styles that were not Japanese.

In the Heian Period, poetry and prose flourished as the aristocracy increased in number and in wealth. Many men were literate and often engaged in poetry-writing contests. Indeed, the writing and recitation of poetry was a national obsession for elites. Some aristocratic women were also literate and wrote about their culture in semi-fictionalized prose. Perhaps the most famous work written in the period was penned by Murasaki Shikibu (978-1014) entitled *The Tale of Genji*. This work is understood to have been very influential and was widely circulated. Many scholars argue that it is the world’s first novel.

Lavishly illustrated scrolls were created during the period to tell the stories, in visual form, found in the *Tale of Genji*. These scrolls could be quite resplendent and made use of bright reds, deep greens and lush blues. Artists

used long, flowing brush strokes. Faces are rounded in this genre and characters highly stylized, making it difficult to make definitive identification of characters. Some images were of lovers wooing and being wooed through the use of poetry. All are set in or near the city of Heian (Kyoto) or in the surrounding hills. The image below is one of the best surviving examples of a Heian Period *Yamato-e* painting.



*Yamato-e* style paintings even appeared in Buddhist sutra scrolls, although many of the themes would seem at odds with Buddhist theology. The *Yamato-e* style continued to evolve over the next several centuries as Japan shifted to the warrior era. During this shift, images of Heian courtiers enjoying the splendor, opulence and conspicuous consumption of the era diminished in number. In their stead, artists began to depict themes related to the more austere lives of the warrior class.

## Portraiture

As Japan moved into the first warrior era known as the Kamakura Period (1185-1333), there is evidence that artists attempted to combine some degree of realism with heavily stylized elements of the *Yamato-e* style to render portraits of the powerful and famous. Since portraits were the only way to capture the image of loved ones before the age of photography, faces had to bear some resemblance to the actual visage of the individual. In the image below, we can see a portrait of the first shogun of Japan: Minamoto no Yoritomo (1149-1199). This image is believed to date from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, was painted on silk and was one of the first of its kind of a military leader. What makes this painting distinctive is that the body of Yoritomo is depicted in a highly stylized way. The robe shows impossibly straight angles and, other than a few objects, is mostly devoid of color, although the artist took great pains to illustrate its intricate embroidery. The original color of the background was likely gold or tan.

Yoritomo's head and face is clearly identifiable and resembles the sketches of several contemporary artists.



This style of portraiture remained the ideal for shogun until the age of photography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though there are several differences, it is clear from the portrait below of one of the last of Japan's shoguns, Tokugawa Ieyoshi (1793-1853), that little had changed in this style for over 600 years!



## Monochrome painting

Buddhism was responsible for changing the Japanese artistic sensibility yet again with the introduction of the Zen sect. Although it first appeared in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, its popularity soared during the Muromachi Period (1333-1477). Zen Buddhism, with its austere lifestyle and emphasis on the ephemeral nature of all things, seemed to fit the warrior ethic. Warriors were to live simple, frugal lives and clear their minds of extraneous thoughts. For strict adherents, life was meaningless and the accumulation of wealth, power and material goods was folly. The less ego one possessed, the better. This sect of Buddhism was eagerly embraced by the Ashikaga shoguns during the Muromachi Period and given official support. Although the Zen lifestyle wasn't for everyone, and the number of strict adherents never grew very large, it still exists today. Nonetheless, it had outsized influence on the development of the Japanese artistic sensibility (in every artistic endeavor) and still is clearly evident in the contemporary era.

One of the styles that typifies the Zen aesthetic is monochrome painting. It is believed that this style of painting came to Japan with Chinese Zen (Chan) missionaries in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Monochrome paintings were first rendered on silk (and later, other mediums). As the name suggests, artists use black ink and extremely angular brush strokes to create stark images that hint at deeper meanings. Mountains are most often used as a background and scenes, often with Zen themes, are found in the foreground. Paintings are very stylized and sometimes very sparse. Chinese influence is unmistakable, but Japanese monochrome paintings have their own distinctive flair. Below is an example of a 15<sup>th</sup> century work by Tenshō Shūbun (1414-1463). It is entitled "Reading in a Bamboo Grove" and depicts a man reading in the countryside away from the

hustle and bustle of city life. This work depicts just how small man is in nature and how insignificant his efforts are in the greater scheme of life.



Monochrome paintings are still produced today and are representative of one of Japan's finest art forms.

## Early Modern

### Screen Paintings

Decorated room dividers (screens) were first imported from China in the Nara Period. Over the centuries, Japanese developed their own style of painting screens. Some eventually became quite large and were composed of 2-6 panels and were as tall as 1.5 meters. Early screens were made of silk. Later, paper attached to wood became a popular medium. Scenes were painted in many different styles including the *Yamato-e*, monochrome and later, *Ukiyo-e* style. Some screens reflected elements of all three in the same painting. In short, there were few stylistic conventions for painting screens. Some had one scene

on all panels, others showed a single scene on each panel. Most had backgrounds of gold. Popular themes included landscapes of the four seasons, which would often be changed with the changing of the each season. Mythical and real animals were often portrayed as were temples and scenes of festivals. Processions of lords and their samurai retainers back and forth from Edo (Tokyo), known as *sankin kōtai*, were also prominent. Screens are therefore understood to be a medium and not necessarily a distinctive style in its own right.



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## The 19<sup>th</sup> Century

### Woodblock Prints

#### Ukiyo-e

Woodblock printing in East Asia dates back to the Han Dynasty in China (206BCE-220CE). In this printing form, artists carved reverse images of Chinese characters on a sheet of wood, printers dabbed ink on the wood, and paper (or other mediums) was pressed down on the wood blocks to produce a large number of copies of the written word from the same carving. These were largely monochromatic texts printed on scrolls and often conveyed a Buddhist sutra or a government proclamation. Scholars believe that woodblock printing was imported to Japan in the 8<sup>th</sup> century at roughly the same time as Buddhism began to gain favor in the Nara Period. Over the course of time, texts were illustrated and were hand painted. Later, artists included less and less text and more and more images. Japanese woodblock printing of texts continued until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is not clear exactly when woodblock printing in Japan transitioned to images. However, by the Edo Period (1600-1868), the Japanese had perfected the style and gifted the world with some of the most brilliant works of art known to man. It should be noted that woodblock printing in its mature form during the Edo Period was not, strictly speaking, painting, because a human hand did not directly paint an image.

The most famous form of woodblock printing in Japan is known as *Ukiyo-e*. This literally means “floating world painting.” During the early years of the Edo Period, Japanese printers discovered how to precisely position the same print on different blocks so that multiple images and colors could be layered one after another. In this way, polychrome images were produced. *Ukiyo-e* prints are lively and colorful and employ many different hues. They are often bold and reproduce lively scenes of events that took place in the city of Edo. Some were highly stylized and others more realistic. Topics include landscapes (many of Mt. Fuji), angry seas, scenes of the Yoshiwara pleasure quarter, urban festivals, Kabuki actors, ghosts, gruesome crimes, shrines, animals and mystical creatures. If it could be imagined, Japanese printers produced it. It should be noted that these were produced for the mass market and to be enjoyed by a large cross-section of society. Some of the artists became very famous for producing spectacular masterpieces, and reproductions of these pieces are still sold in Japan. Among the most well-known artists are Hokusai Katsushika (1760-1849), Hiroshige Utagawa (1797-1858) and Utamaro Kitagawa (1753-1806).

The image below is known simply as “Great Wave off Kanagawa” and is one in Hokusai’s series of “Thirty-six View of Mt. Fuji” produced in 1831. It is, undoubtedly one of the most famous images ever produced in Japan and is recognized the world over as a masterpiece. This image is composed of very deep blues, stark whites and has a grey/tan background. It is highly stylized but manages to convey the extreme peril of a very angry sea. In the background, Mt. Fuji stands in timeless repose, providing a contrast to the peril in the foreground the sailors are facing.



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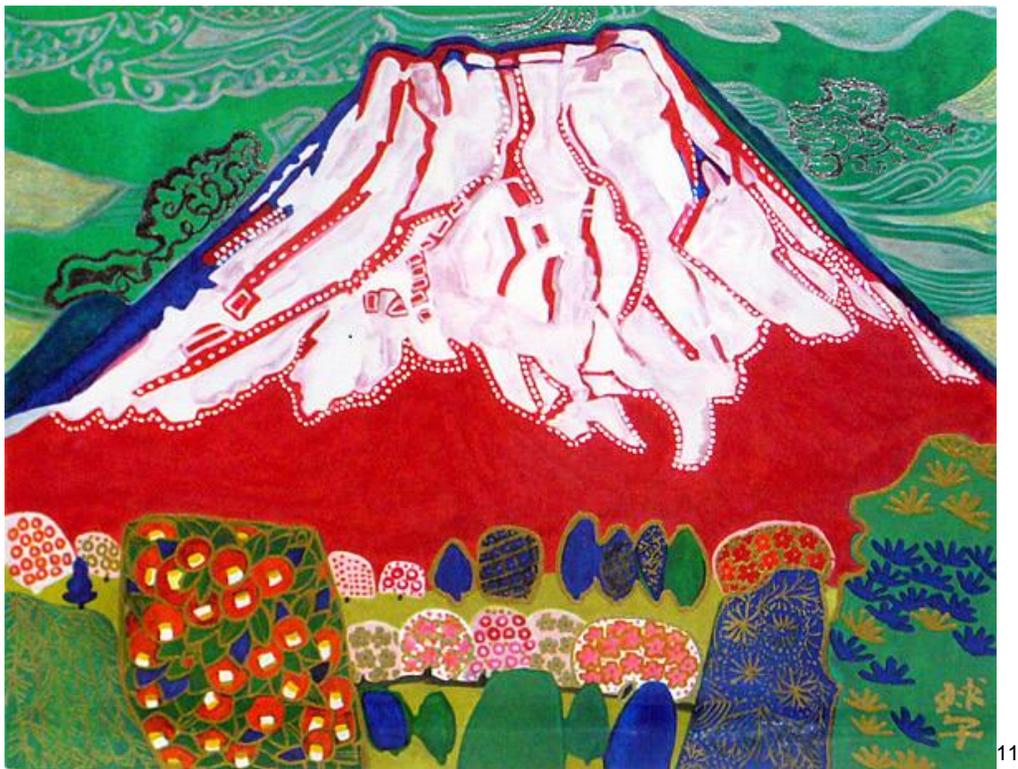
Another very famous example was produced by Hiroshige entitled “Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi Bridge.” The image below demonstrates his mastery of the form and provides a clear contrast to Hokusai’s print above. This print was a part of Hiroshige’s “One Hundred Famous Views of Edo” and was released in 1857. He used muted colors and a very indistinct background. There is some deep blue and aqua, but he also uses quite a bit of grey and tan. These palette selections help convey a sense of calm in the image, even though the pedestrians on the bridge are caught in the rain



The Japanese are rightly proud of the *Ukiyo-e* form. Its influence on the development of *anime* (animation), *manga* (graphic novels) and *nishiki-e* (cheaply produced woodblock prints conveying unapproved news in the Edo and early Meiji Periods—often used in underground newspapers) is undeniable.

## The 20<sup>th</sup> Century

There are innumerable artists producing oil-based paintings in the contemporary era. One of the most prolific and respected is Tamako Kataoka (1905-2008). Kataoka produced dozens of works in her long life (103 years) and is recognized as a modern master. As was the case with 19<sup>th</sup> century *Ukiyo-e* masters, Kataoka was enamored with Mt. Fuji as a theme and even put on an exhibition of her paintings in Paris in 1972 entitled “Thirty-six Sceneries of Mt. Fuji.” Many of her Mt. Fuji Paintings have a strong element of red in them. This is a nod to Hokusai’s “Red Fuji” produced in 1832. Kataoka’s oil paintings also show the influence of other masters including Gustav Klimt. (Klimt was also likely influenced by Japanese screen paintings.) Kataoka produced Mt. Fuji paintings in every season of the year. The painting below is entitled “Blooming Flowers and Mt. Fuji.” It is a highly stylized image showing her fondness for the use of bright reds, dark blues and deep greens.



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## Suggested Readings

Noma Seiroku, *The Arts of Japan, Vols. 1 & 2*, (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1975).

Moritoku Hirabayashi, *Twelve Centuries of Japanese Art from the Imperial Collections*, (Washington, D.C.: Frieer Gallery of Art, 1997).

Michael R. Cunningham, *The Triumph of Japanese style*, (Cleveland: Museum of Art, 1991).

Ienaga Saburo, *Painting in the Yamato Style*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1973).

Sandy Kita, *The Floating World of Ukiyo-e: Shadows, Dreams, and Substance*. (New York: Abrams in Association with the Library of Congress, 2001).

Julia M. White, *Hokusai and Hiroshige: Great Japanese Prints from the James A. Michener Collection, Honolulu Academy of Arts*, (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1998).

### **Discussion Questions**

In what ways did Buddhism influence the development of Japanese painting? How did that change over time? In what ways did religion play a role in the development of painting in all cultures?

Is monochrome painting a uniquely Japanese form of expression? If so, how does it differ from (or is similar to) that which is seen in China and Korea? How is monochrome painting different from sketches found in other parts of the world?

Is it possible to explain the fascination with Mt. Fuji evident in Japanese paintings? Do other cultures have a similar fascination with one particular element of their landscape?

In what ways is woodblock printing similar to painting? Is a different form of artistic expression or is it very similar? Should it fall into its own genre in the early modern era?

<sup>1</sup> Image in the public domain.

<sup>2</sup> In the public domain.

<sup>3</sup> In the public domain.

<sup>4</sup> Image owned by the Tokugawa Art Museum.

<sup>5</sup> Portrait in the public domain.

<sup>6</sup> Image in the public domain.

<sup>7</sup> In the public domain.

<sup>8</sup> In the public domain.

<sup>9</sup> In the public domain.

<sup>10</sup> In the public domain.

<sup>11</sup> Art Net, Blooming Flowers and Mt. Fuji, accessed June 25, 2020, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/tamako-kataoka/blooming-flowers-and-mt-fuji-WGYmxw9HvSHtmwIKt3PDLg2>